



# Defining Postmodernism

## The Theoretical Debate

## 3 Positions

- ◆ 1. Lyotard's: postmodernism as part of modernism -THE AESTHETIC VIEW
- ◆ 2. Jameson's: postmodernism as radical social and material break with modernism -THE MATERIALIST VIEW
- ◆ 3. Habermas': postmodernism as nihilism -THE ANTI-POSTMODERN VIEW

# Habermas

- ◆ 1. Habermas opposes both conservatives in Germany and neo-conservative theorists (French poststructuralists). Both ally themselves with irrationalism.
- ◆ 2. Habermas' position reflects the contingencies of German culture - he sees himself as a defender of the left (whereas postmodernism is identified with the left in the US).
- ◆ Habermas' criticism is largely responsible for injecting life into the American pomo scene of the 70s

# American Pomo Scene - 3 Positions

- ◆ 1. dismiss postmodernism, hold up modernism as universal truth - reflects 50s aesthetic thought
- ◆ 2. condemn modernism, embrace postmodernism as expression of 60s populism
- ◆ 3. postmodernism as symptom of “anything goes” attitude of consumer capitalism - 70s

# Habermas

- ◆ 4. Habermas sends challenge to French and American postmodernists to account for the political dimension that neo-conservatism allegedly ignores

# Lyotard

- ◆ 1. Lyotard's "Answering the Question: what is postmodernism?" as response to Habermas' criticism
- ◆ 2. Dual shift in position from Postmodern Condition (PMC):
  - postmodern is a "negative" or "critical" element that is contained within modernity
  - modernity redefined as condition ensuing from dissolution of stable "reality"
- ◆ 3. Yields a net increase in freedom - we are free to conceptualize reality independently of historicism

# Lyotard

- ◆ 4. Leads to an aestheticization of politics: art takes up gap left by failure of foundationalist project
- ◆ 5. Modern art identified as sublime: vocation to “present the unrepresentable”
- ◆ 6. Postmodernism is defined in two ways:
  - as the “motor” of what drives modern art to this vocation
  - as the affirmative freedom which results from art’s break with the notion of “good form” (=beauty)

# Problems with Lyotard

- ◆ 1. position remains essentially negative and critical
- ◆ 2. overstresses stylistic



# Jameson

- ◆ 1. postmodernism not part of modern, but radical break with it
- ◆ 2. postmodernism not an aesthetic condition, but a material revolution
- ◆ 3. postmodernism as “cultural dominant”

# Van Gogh and Warhol

- ◆ 2 modernist interpretations of Van Gogh's "Peasant Shoes"
  - 1. art as transformational
  - 2. art as creating world
  - both stress the continuity between art and worldly context
  - hence both involve "hermeneutical" imperative

# Van Gogh and Warhol

- ◆ Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes" require different approach, one that breaks with hermeneutical imperative
- ◆ No continuity between shoes and lifeworld; shoes as commodity fetishes

# Traits of Postmodernism I

- ◆ 1. flatness or depthlessness
- ◆ 2. role of photography and “photographic/negative”
- ◆ 3. waning of affect
  - all of these can be seen in Warhol

# Traits of Postmodernism II

- ◆ 4. role of the theoretical
- ◆ 5. fragmentation of the subject
- ◆ 6. disintegration unique style
- ◆ 7. waning of thematic of time
- ◆ 8. pastiche replaces parody
- ◆ 9. historicism replaces history
- ◆ 10. nostalgia mode

# Bonaventura Hotel

- ◆ Trait 11: mutation in lived space
- ◆ Trait 12: abolition of critical distance
- ◆ All elements of hotel work to achieve effect of “total world” - closed off from the outside world
- ◆ As an example, it demonstrates the shift in experience that is correlative to the shift in “cultural dominant”

# Problems and Strengths of Jameson's Model

- ◆ Problem 1: cannot break with modernist value on the cognitive
- ◆ Problem 2: paradoxically ends up relying on representation - insofar as Bonaventura's effect on body is a “representational shorthand” for the bewildering effects of “global communicational network”
- ◆ Strength: introduces the theme of experience and the body